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Review of the book Deaf around the World: The impact of language / ed. by Mathur & Napoli

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Gaurav Mathur & Donna Jo Napoli (eds.), *Deaf around the world: The impact of language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xviii +398.

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Since its advent half a century ago, the field of sign language linguistics has had close ties to education and the empowerment of deaf communities, a union that is fittingly celebrated by *Deaf around the world: The impact of language*. With this fruitful relationship in mind, sign language researchers and deaf educators gathered in Philadelphia in 2008, and in the volume under review, Gaurav Mathur & Donna Jo Napoli (henceforth M&N) present a selection of papers from this conference, organised in two parts: ‘Sign languages: Creation, context, form’, and ‘Social issues/civil rights’. Each of the chapters is accompanied by a response chapter on the same or a related topic. The first part of the volume focuses on the linguistics of sign languages and includes papers on the impact of language modality on morphosyntax, second language acquisition, and grammaticalisation, highlighting the fine balance that sign linguists need to strike when conducting methodologically sound research. The second part of the book includes accounts by deaf activists from countries including China, India, Japan, Kenya, South Africa and Sweden who are considered prominent figures in areas such as deaf education, politics, culture and international development.

In their introduction, M&N note that some of the chapter authors refer to deaf people as ‘Deaf’, to indicate cultural status as opposed to audiological status (7). In many countries, ‘Deaf’ communities are focused on the urban centres where deaf people meet, including deaf schools, sports activities, organisations and the like. However, M&N add that the deaf/Deaf distinction may be blurred or even non-existent in other situations. This is certainly

borne out by our own experiences as fieldworkers in Indonesia, where such distinct labels are not easy to apply. Indeed, we would suggest that the deaf communities where we work are atypical compared with many of the deaf communities that dominate the literature. In this review, we would like to reflect upon the unique blend of academic and activist papers presented in M&N's book by considering some of the implications of our own academic work for the atypical communities concerned.

Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world, stretching 5,000 kilometres across a vast archipelago. Given such extraordinary geography, Indonesia's urban deaf communities are markedly dispersed, and have growing, but still limited, communication networks, which sets deaf communities in Indonesia apart from those in more developed countries where deaf communities are better connected and less geographically isolated. The sociolinguistic setting of sign language in Indonesia brings challenges in identifying the different signing varieties, and crucially, such 'language delimitation' can have a profound impact on the deaf communities concerned. An interesting debate has been taking place recently concerning the methods used to document and delimit sign language varieties, but less has been said about the potential implications of these methods for the communities concerned. For many years, the delimitation of sign languages has been influenced strongly by glottochronology and lexicostatistical comparisons of limited word lists to identify cognates, a method that is championed in this volume by James Woodward ('Some observations on research methodology in lexicostatistical studies of sign languages'). Yet the efficacy of these methods has been called into question by spoken language linguists for a number of years (for example, Comrie 2009: 9). Other methods, such as grammatical typology (Zeshan 2000) and Labovian sociolinguistics (Lucas, Bayley & Valli 2001), have been applied to sign languages with much success in recent years. There are further reasons for caution, such as the presence of iconicity in sign languages – another effect of the visual-gestural modality – and, as Carol Padden implies in her chapter, 'Sign language geography', comparisons between sign language varieties would be greatly enriched by consideration of major structural domains such as grammar and prosody (31).

Karen Nakamura picks up on issues of language delimitation in her chapter, 'The language politics of Japanese Sign Language (*Nihon Shuwa*)', where she notes that languages are not essentially discrete, but rather political and structural constructs. She then describes issues that have arisen in Japan around language ownership, such as how a sign language is defined, who maintains control over it, and how new signs are added to its lexicon. These issues are now also being discussed by members of some urban deaf communities in Indonesia, whose sign language has not hitherto been documented. Concerning language delimitation, it does not seem appropriate at the outset to refer to 'Indonesian Sign Language' without further

research into variation, since sign languages, like spoken languages, do not always follow natural borders. Palfreyman (forthcoming) is conducting research on the extent and nature of variation between urban sign language varieties on the Indonesian islands of Java and Sulawesi, but the aim is not to delimit languages, which should be the prerogative of the deaf community. This presents a new approach in the field of sign language documentation, as previous research has generally sought to delimit languages on linguistic grounds. We suggest that what deaf communities need is meta-linguistic awareness, so that they can make sense of and navigate the complex attitudes towards language and identity that are held by deaf sign language users; what they do not need is linguists who make decisions about where the boundaries of their languages fall, and what the languages should be called.

In what is perhaps the most powerful chapter of this collection, Amy Wilson & Nickson Kakiri ('Best practices for collaborating with deaf communities in developing countries') argue that positive change will take place when Deaf people are empowered to make changes for themselves. Academics conducting fieldwork are often well positioned to empower deaf communities, and this has become part of the consensus on what it means to conduct ethical research on sign languages. The means of empowerment will vary according to the situation, and researchers must pay full regard to the needs of the community. Their contribution might include sharing information about sign language, assisting with local development projects, or aiding the academic development of local deaf research assistants to provide a bridge to further or higher education. For example, the second author of this review worked with urban deaf communities in Indonesia as a deaf volunteer for two years, and continues to support – and learn from – urban deaf communities in Indonesia while conducting fieldwork. One of these communities is now running its own programme of innovative projects to raise awareness in the hearing community concerning sign language and deaf people. It is anticipated that, once the academic research project is complete, the findings will be used to empower Indonesia's urban deaf communities further.

Working in the village community of Bengkala on the Indonesian island Bali, the first author of this review has documented and described Kata Kolok, an indigenous sign language that has emerged in response to a high incidence of hereditary deafness (de Vos forthcoming). Kata Kolok is historically unrelated to the other signing varieties of Indonesia. As Angela Nonaka points out in her chapter, 'Interrogatives in Ban Khor Sign Language: A preliminary description', village sign languages are currently defined by their sociolinguistic ecologies. In contrast to the sign language communities described above, a major portion of Ban Khor Sign Language users are hearing individuals who sign with their deaf community members in all contexts of village life. Nonaka demonstrates that, although this larger group of bimodal bilinguals are native speakers of Thai or Nyoh, these spoken languages have had little influence on interrogatives in the village

sign language. The Balinese village sign language Kata Kolok is similar to Ban Khor Sign Language in terms of its sociolinguistics, and is currently used by 46 deaf individuals of varying ages, as well as up to 1,500 hearing signers. While there are no comparable figures regarding urban deaf communities in Indonesia, the ratio of deaf and hearing signers is skewed in the opposite way, with many more deaf than hearing signers, and it is deaf people who own these sign languages. In contrast, in the case of Kata Kolok, there is a sense in which both hearing and non-hearing community members have ownership of their village sign language, and for this reason the Kata Kolok corpus has systematically included hearing signers in creating a digital archive of the language.

As Ulrike Zeshan argues in her chapter, 'Village sign languages: A commentary', Kata Kolok and other village sign languages have the potential to make a considerable contribution to our understanding of the cross-linguistic diversity among sign languages. It is therefore unfortunate that village sign languages often become endangered immediately after coming into contact with larger urban or national sign languages, especially in educational contexts. This has also been a concern in Bengkulu, where very few deaf children have had the opportunity to go to school. In consultation with the Deaf Alliance, a local group of deaf and hearing community members that advocates the rights of deaf villagers and their hearing relatives, the first author of this review has sought to provide educational opportunities for the youngest generation of Kata Kolok signers. The hearing members of the Deaf Alliance in particular, have highlighted the worry that they might not be able to communicate with their fellow deaf villagers in future if the sign language shifted from Kata Kolok to the variety used in deaf schools in other parts of Bali. In other communities, too, the vitality of village sign languages is often linked to the attitudes of the larger proportion of hearing signers towards sign language use (Zeshan & de Vos forthcoming).

The discussions in Bengkulu led to the establishment of a unit for deaf children in the local elementary school in 2007, which is endorsed and supported by the regional and national government. Kata Kolok has since been used as a language of instruction in the deaf classroom by several of the hearing teachers in the school. Many of the authors of the chapters in the second part of the volume under review stress the importance of deaf role models in the social and linguistic development of deaf children, but in the case of Bengkulu, all deaf adults are illiterate. In 'Social situations and the education of deaf children in China', Jun Hui Yang suggests that to enrich the education of deaf children, hearing teachers should seek deaf consultancy whenever possible. In line with Yang's recommendation, the first author of this review, the Deaf Alliance of Bengkulu, and two deaf mothers have recently started to produce a pedagogical dictionary of Kata Kolok. This community initiative has already led to the identification of differences in the lexica of Kata Kolok and its surrounding spoken languages

(Balinese and Indonesian) in semantic domains such as kinship and colour. The observed differences call into question the impact of culture in processes of lexicalisation. By capitalising on local resources and taking into account the needs of the specific deaf community, linguistic research and deaf education have proven, once again, to be conducive to the empowerment of a deaf community.

The editors of *Deaf around the world* conclude that ‘the picture that emerges shows great similarity and continuity in the Deaf world’ (15) – a claim that seems disputable to us. The chapters in this book cover a multitude of issues and, of course, demonstrate some common ground between different languages and communities, but the picture as a whole now shows an impressive degree of linguistic and sociolinguistic diversity. From an academic point of view, some of the papers in this volume contain statements that are unsubstantiated by references, which makes it difficult to assess the accuracy of these claims for different deaf communities. As we have shown, it may not be appropriate to apply, in wholesale fashion, linguistic and cultural constructs from one deaf community onto other deaf communities. Notwithstanding this reservation, this book is a good example of how sign language research and deaf empowerment can and should go hand in hand, and would have great value as a set text in sign linguistics and deaf studies classes. It is clear that linguistics and other academic fields have much to contribute to positive change within deaf communities. We hope that *Deaf around the world* will buttress the efforts of those already involved in such work, and encourage other academics to follow suit.

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